

Nathaniel



This short story takes place before the events of Under the Stars. This is written from Nathaniel's point of view. As always – additional chapters are unedited so expect to find typos and errors!

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“You’re off tomorrow, aren’t you, Nathaniel?”

The voice of Jenna, one of the administrators in the office, startles me, forcing me to look up from the laptop screen and legal information I swear I’ve been working on for so long that I could probably recite it in my sleep.

“Off until Tuesday,” I confirm.

“Two days off, that’s a long holiday for you, are you doing anything nice? Finally getting to see there is a world outside of your laptop?” she teases.

“It was my parents’ wedding anniversary yesterday. They’re having a big party at the weekend, so I’m heading there tomorrow, staying until Monday,” I explain.

I’m used to the teasing in the office about my lack of holidays. Used to it, but don’t understand it. It isn’t like I’m the only person who

arrives early and leaves late. Lorna, my boss, I'm sure she'd sleep here if she could.

"Well, I'll miss you tomorrow and on Monday," Jenna coos.

I glance at her. She doesn't look quite ready to leave the office just yet, despite having her bag slung over her shoulder and it being long past the time the rest of her team left.

"I'll admit, I'm not looking forward to my inbox on Tuesday," I reply.

"Perhaps we could grab a coffee or some lunch next week, and you can tell me all about your fun weekend," she suggests.

"I'll just bore you silly talking about my niece."

I smile as I think about being with Willow this weekend. She loves a party, and I know she'll be excited about dressing up. I have no doubt that she'll try to convince me to get on the dancefloor with her at the party, and I'm sure the weekend will be filled with her non-stop chatter, requests for piggyback rides, storytelling, and playing with her dolls and teddies. I don't mind. I love Willow to pieces. She's a whirlwind and always has a smile on her face. I don't get to see her as often as I would like, but often enough for her to call me her favourite uncle, even if she has no other uncles as competition. It's a title I'll gladly take, a role I'll happily fill. My sister, Georgiana, is a natural mother, and I love catching up with them. Her partner, Sawyer, I'm not looking forward to seeing him, but I'm sure the weekend will be busy enough that I won't see much of him.

"I wouldn't mind. I love kids," Jenna proclaims.

"Nathaniel!"

The sound of Lorna's voice from her office makes Jenna give me a wry smile, and she gives me a little wave before walking away without another word.

I lock my laptop screen and head in the direction of Lorna's office.

“Everything okay?” I ask. I mentally run through the things I’m committed to do before leaving the office today. I’m up to date with everything.

Lorna grins at me. “I just thought you might need a bit of rescuing.”

“From?”

“Oh, Nathaniel, for somebody so smart, you are so innocent. I’d put good money on a bet that Jenna has a major crush on you.”

“I doubt it,” I scoff.

The office has strict no-dating rules, both about dating within the same teams but especially about dating subordinates. If Jenna has any interest in me, it couldn’t happen the way she might want. Not with me. I’m a rule follower. Even without that rule, Jenna would be better setting her sights on somebody else, somebody ready to give her something in return. I’m a workaholic, and more than one girlfriend has told me they’re at a point in their life when they want something more serious than me arriving home late from work or not taking enough time because I’m always in the middle of something important.

“Sure,” Lorna replies, her tone suggesting again that I’m an idiot.

“Are you staying much longer?” I ask.

She looks at her watch. “Maybe an hour.”

I know Lorna, her hour won’t be an hour. It’ll turn into two, where she’ll look up from her laptop, swear and rush to gather her things, proclaiming it’s a good job her husband also frequently works late. I’ve seen it a million times, and it’s usually my cue to get up and leave the office too.

“I’ll save this file and then I’m going to get going. I’m trying to get to the gym given the weekend is going to be filled with celebrations.”

“How many annoying questions will you get from your folks this weekend?” she asks, grinning.

I laugh. “Hopefully they’ll be so busy with the anniversary party, they won’t think to ask me any questions until Sunday.”

“I have dinner with the in-laws on Saturday. I expect before I’ve even had the first glass of wine, they’ll ask me whether we’ve changed our mind about having kids. Apparently, their greatest failure is their son choosing to marry a woman who doesn’t want children, even though he doesn’t want them either.” Lorna shrugs.

I give her a sympathetic smile. Lorna’s a little older than me and one late night when we were working and got talking about our personal lives, she complained to me about how her family and her in-laws are constantly asking when they were going to ‘work fewer hours’ and ‘produce grandbabies’. I know Marcus, her husband. We’ve met a few times at work events when he’s attended with Lorna, and he’s clear about his preferences. Double income, no kids.

“If they’re anything like mine, I’m surprised you even get the glass of wine,” I joke, but then I feel guilty because it’s probably a sore subject.

I know how I feel when my parents are really getting into the topic, asking me if I’ve been dating, or I’m any further along to settle down. When Georgiana announced her pregnancy with Willow, my parents were thrilled and it took all the pressure off me, the eldest. They occasionally bring up the topic with me, just like I know they ask Georgiana when she’ll have another baby, talk about how Willow needs a sibling.

If I ever have kids in the future, when they’re all grown up, I swear I’ll never ask them if they’re going to produce a grandchild.

“Get going, Nathaniel.” Lorna smiles. I nod and leave her office, heading back to my desk so I can finish up.

I finalise my last document. I fire off a couple of emails that won’t wait until the new week. I set my out of office response, stash away

my laptop, pick up my bag, and then head out of the office, calling my goodbyes to Lorna as I leave.

I walk through the busy streets, heading towards the gym. I weave in and out of people, bypassing couples who look like they're heading for dinner, or groups of families that look like they've been on a day trip to the capital, sightseeing and purchasing souvenirs. As I walk, I debate whether I should leave for my parents' house tonight or in the morning as I originally planned. I could skip the gym, go home, grab my bags and head up tonight, surprise my parents. Maybe grab a drink with Georgiana, if Mum will watch Willow – I know it would be far too much trouble for Sawyer to step up and look after his daughter. I haven't had a proper, face-to-face catch up with Georgiana for ages. I know Sawyer won't join us. Our mutual dislike of one another will outweigh Sawyer's preference to get a drink.

I weigh up whether Mum will consider it a nice surprise if I turn up early, or if she'll get herself stressed out if she hasn't prepared a room for me to sleep in. She'll fret and fuss, I know she will. She's been doing the bulk of the planning for the anniversary party, and I'm sure her nerves are running short.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out as I continue to walk through the crowd. I scroll the screen, seeing a text from Georgiana.

Hey, Yoda! Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow. Dad and Mum are taking Willow for a couple of hours, Sawyer is busy, so do you fancy getting lunch with your little sis? Will you be here before noon?

I smile to myself. I quickly type a response.

You paying?

Within seconds, there is a response.

Hahaha.

I chuckle before typing a response.

Of course I'm up for taking you out to lunch. I'll pay. Can't wait to see you! We can strategize how to handle Mum and Dad in the run up to the party. See you tomorrow, Georgi. Love you!

Her response is quick.

Ah, you sentimental fool. Love you too!

I slip my phone back into my pocket and continue my route to the gym, my mind made up that I'll leave tomorrow morning as planned. I'll arrive to say hello to my parents and Willow before they go for their trip, and I'll have a lovely catch up with Georgiana.

I can't wait.

The sound of my mobile phone beeping out pulls me out of my deep sleep. I frown as I squint at the clock, the red digits hurting my eyes as they shine in the darkness of my bedroom.

I grab my phone, seeing my display reads the number for my parents' landline. It's long past midnight and there is absolutely no reason for them to be calling me. Not if it wasn't an emergency.

My first thought is my dad. Last year, he had some health concerns, but he's been fine for months.

I answer the call.

"Nathaniel?"

It's my mum's voice. But she doesn't sound like her usual self. Mum is usually sunny and almost song-like on the phone. Now, she sounds... far away. Quiet. Stunned.

"Is Dad okay?" I ask.

"Georgiana has been in an accident," Mum replies, not addressing my question about my dad. She still sounds far away.

Georgiana?

“What’s happened? Where is she?” I ask.

Now I’m wide awake. Up and out of my bed. Searching for my clothes. Whatever has happened, it sounds more serious than a small trip or fall. Mum wouldn’t have called if it was a simple trip or fall. She wouldn’t sound like this if it were something simple.

“They went out for dinner. Sawyer had been drinking. There was a car accident.”

“Mum,” I say, suddenly feeling like there is some piece of information that I’m not yet hearing. She gives a long exhale of breath. I swear it’s like somebody has suddenly stood behind me and ran their fingers down my spine because my whole body runs cold. Dread crawls across every inch of my skin. My stomach dips. “Mum, where is Georgi?”

There’s a wail, something that sounds like a wounded animal, howling at the moon.

Oh my God. Is that my dad?

There’s a clatter. It sounds like the handle of the phone has been dropped.

“Nathaniel?” This is a different voice. Not my mother, nor my father. “This is Florence, from next door.”

“Where is Georgiana?” I repeat.

“I’m so sorry, Nathaniel. She’s gone. She and Sawyer are both gone.”

Florence says this all in such a sweet, sympathetic voice, but it feels like a round of bullets to my chest.

How is it possible that Georgiana is *gone*? Georgiana, my younger sister, my closest friend, a vibrant and energetic soul. Somebody with so much to look forward to in life. Somebody who literally lights up a room when she enters, with a charming smile and a funny story. Somebody who always knows exactly what to say to make me feel

better – when to give me a stern talking to and when to tell a joke and mock me.

Somebody with an endless amount of love to give and showered it daily on her daughter.

Willow. Oh my God. *Willow.*

I clear my throat. “Was Willow with them?”

“No, sweetheart. She is fast asleep. She stayed with your parents. Georgiana and Sawyer asked them to babysit. She’s fine. She doesn’t know yet. Your mum says she’ll tell her in the morning,” Florence explains. She sighs. “I’ll stay with your parents, to make sure they’re okay.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “Tell them I’m on my way.”

I hang up before she can respond to me; before I lose the grip I have on my control. I sink back onto the bed. I drop my phone onto the mattress. I sob like I haven’t sobbed before.

I don’t know how long it takes me to pull myself back to a vague resemblance of who I was before the call. I know nothing in my life will ever be the same again. Georgiana is gone and nothing can bring her back, and nothing will ever make that better. I just can’t make everything about myself. Not now. Not when I know my parents are miles away at home, breaking down in ways that I cannot comprehend. I’ve lost my sister, but they’ve lost their daughter.

I can’t break down when there is a little girl who will be waking up in the morning to be told her life has changed, that she will never see her parents again.

I need to be strong for them all. I need to be the one to shoulder the burden, to keep us going through this darkness. There will be time in the future for me to break down and grieve, to start to mourn the loss I’ll never get over, to work out how I’m supposed to live in a world without somebody I simply don’t remember not being in my

life. Every childhood memory I have features Georgiana. In our teen years, we were the best of friends, unlike so many of my friends who had sisters who they hated or who hated them. Georgiana was always the first person I shared a secret with, the first person I called with news – good or bad because she was always overjoyed about the good and knew how to console about the bad.

She was the first person I told when I got into university. She was the one who advised me on how to tell our dad that I wouldn't take over his business. She was the first person I told when I got my job, where she congratulated me and told me all my years of studying was worth it. She was the first person I'd call after a breakup.

I was the first person she told she was pregnant. She was excited to tell me I was going to be an uncle, telling me it was a practice run to telling our parents they were going to be grandparents.

I push myself up from the bed and get myself dressed. I grab my phone and my charger; pick up the bag I finished packing last night. I find my car keys. I leave my place and head towards my car. It'll take me over four hours to get to my parents and to Willow, and I know it'll be the longest hours of my life.

I go through all the motions of getting in the car and driving. All the while, I'm stuck with a single thought in my head.

Georgiana is gone.

Georgiana is gone.

Georgiana is gone.